THE FACE IN THE INKSTAND.

"Tales of Ten Travelers" Series.

By EDGAR L. WAKEMAN.

Our Ten Travelers had for some time been comfortably seated in their favorite nooks and lounging places. Through the influence of some chance remark the desultory conversation had drifted into our recalling various unaccountable mental impressions and phenomena with their curious and often startling results, and the Student Traveler, who had listened attentively throughout, after a bit of genial banter at his unaccustomed silence, began the relation of the following pleasant tale.

It is a very short and simple story, without a single thread of tragedy in it, though it has an odd beginning and an agreeable ending for those who are not averse to occasionally hearing of the humble heart dramas among lowly folk and lives.

My own part in it was almost an involuntary one; something as when a scene-shifter, half in dream and halt from habit, might return to a darkened and deserted theatre and roll off and on this setting or that until, all unintentional with himself, real players have fitted themselves into his half phantom performance, and at the end he realizes he has almost unconsciously been playwright, manager, prompter and audience, all in one.

It began in the comfortable room of my inn, over against Covent Garden, in London, in which I had shut myself from friends and acquaintances in order to better accomplish some important literary work.

I had been engaged to write a series of tales illustrative of lowly London life for a famous London periodical. The labor had proven a strangely sad pleasure, but had proceeded with extreme success and gratification, when I suddenly came to a point where it seemed impossible for me to coherently pen another sentence.

It could not be accounted for on the ground of overwork or lack of material. I was in splendid physical condition; in a mood of superb mental elation. But there remained the stubborn, insurmountable fact that I could not write.

This almost literary syncope had shut down upon me now for two days. The first sheets of my manuscript were due in the printers' hands at the end of two days more. So much was at stake from promptness or failure, that the sudden realization of all this affected me still more disastrously. I challenged my powers of creation and composition in every manner possible to ordinary mastery of such a situation; but it was of no avail. I was as helpless to perform my allotted task as the scullery maid in the dark kitchen below.

In this unpleasant strait I thought of Chelsea hospital for British army pensioners. I hastened to the fine old place, rife with historic associations, happy in the thought that, among its grim and war scarred inmates, I could no doubt find some quaint, odd character around whom a tender romance could be woven.

I had no more than reached the grounds, when I found a burial squad, just ready to set out with a dead comrade on that last sad march the British pensioner ever takes to the slumberous shades of Brompton.

It was headed by a firing-party of twelve, in old black waist belts with worn cartouche-boxes in front and ancient bayonets dangling behind. Next them stood the tiny old Chelsea fifer, "Little Joe," and the grave and pompous drummer, Harry McDuh.

These were succeeded by the coffin—now resting on the graveled walk covered with a dingy black pall on which was laid the single military trophy of the dead, a worn, three-cornered hat of William the Third's day—and ancient inmates of the dead soldier's ward.

It was not a large squad, but it was an unaccountable cheery one. The old boys were merrily taunting each other with portentous prophecies of who should next fill the "box" that should be thus carried out Brompton way; but I could see their bravado had in it a pitiful undertone of dolor and despair.

Gathered about the halted procession were an hundred or so more of these veteran paupers, some leaning listlessly against the sunny facades of the building; some gathered in fussy knots discussing the merits of the departed; some idly gazing at the little cortege with vacant, stony faces; and others with canes and crutches pothering up and down the line, mingling their cracked old voices in the rough and unseemly badinage.

But the ancient pensioner sergeant in charge of the squad was now coming from the governor's rooms with the burial permit. Premonitory notes upon "Little Joe's" fife accompanied by drum mutterings could be heard. The old fellows were falling into line, as the sergeant took his place behind the rearmost file; and the six veterans who were to bear the coffin upon their shoulders were about to lift it from the ground.

Just then there appeared in the door leading to the corridors of the great Hall a most ancient pensioner. He raised his hand flutteringly and screeched out the one word:

"Halt!"

"It's old Billy!" "Billy and Mike hadn't made up afore Mike croaked!" and "*Wait a bit, sergeant, fur ol' Billy!*" were among the expressions I heard running along the line.

He came puffing, wheezing, whimpering down the broad staircase and terrace. He pushed this one and that one aside petulantly. When he had reached the side of the coffin, he tumbled down beside it and, fumbling the pall and the hat upon it distractedly, blurted out as the tears rolled down his hard old face:

"Mike—Mike! to'rd th' last, ye didn't play fair, stealin' my baccy an' grub an' things, in ward 10; but I can't see ye goin' away t' th' Brompton trenches 'thout sayin' it's all right—all right now, Mike!"

Then old Billy kissed the pall and the hat, sobbed a little, scrambled upon his feet, glared upon his comrades defiantly for his weakness and emotion, and then, stumping along to the sergeant in charge, remarked sententiously:

"Plant 'im as soon as ye likes now, sergeant. Mike was a 'ard un, was Mike. But I've made my peace wi' 'im, an' th' sooner ee's under cover th' better fur all in Chelsy!"

The sergeant gave a low word of command. The coffin was lifted to the shoulders of the men, and the strange, limping, shuffling, halting cortege moved slowly away to the shrill, but subdued notes of Little Joe's fife and Harry McDuh's muffled drum, which hesitantly picked out the familiar air of the 149th psalm.

Ah, here, surely are the pathetic incidents for a story, I thought, as I moved softly to old Billy's side and touched him gently on the shoulder.

I knew that a pensioner's grief, even his mirth, had but one fitting companion. I know, too, a little alehouse hard by—the Royal Military Asylum tavern, an ancient Franklin's Row—where that companion could be had alongside a cheery fire and glittering rows of copper puncheons and pewter mugs, and as I touched him on the shoulder I asked him sympathetically:

"Uncle Billy, won't you come along with me, and, over a mug of 'four ale' and a fresh pipe of tobacco, tell me something about yourself and Mike?"

He looked at me suspiciously for a moment while emitting something between a childish sob and a surly growl, but as the vision of proffered cheer gradually broke over him he yielded to its blandishments and fell in behind me with a soldierly step on our way to the little tavern with the big name in historic Franklin's Row.

I say historic Franklin's Row, for the very place where we were finally cosily seated before a huge deal table, beside a cavernous fire place, was the kitchen of the identical house in which the dissolute Charles, touched by the generous pleadings of kindly Nell Gwynne, gave to her, to be instantly transferred by his favorite as a site for a pensioners' hospital, King James' College and its pleasant surrounding meadows which Charles had just purchased for his sprightly Nell at the beggarly price of thirteen hundred pounds.

The cockles of the old pensioner's heart were soon warmed, and noticing my interested looks about the dark and antiquated place, after a deep and comforting draught at his mug and a few sputtering whiffs at his pipe, the veteran ruminatively began:

"Ay, ay, pardner—no 'fense sense Mike is gone!—it's Nell's ol' 'ome; 'ome o' th' horarage gal as made us th' 'ome o'er theer, sech as it be."

Here he pondered awhile as if fixing it all in his memory just as legend had brought the pretty tale down to its trembling old beneficiaries.

"Ye see, Nell did a 'eep o' dreamin' fur 'er lordly parrymore. She dreamed this, that an' 'tother, rapid like. King Charles allus 'eeded 'er dreams. Maybe that made 'er dream more an' more. Any'ow, one night Nell dreamed mighty 'ard. Next day she wuz glum, like. The king shook 'is 'ead an' worrited o'er it. 'W'at's hup, Nell?' ee plumped at 'er, rough an' ready. 'Oh, ye won't mind wa't's hup!' she an'sers discouraged like. 'Odso, give it a name?' says ee. So she hups an' houts wi' it."

Here the old pensioner closed his eyes, pursed his lips and began in a hoarse whisper of secrecy which could be plainly heard into the middle of the street.

"'Methought,' says Nell, rollin' 'er fine beyes up'ard, 'I was in th' fields o' Chelsy, an' slowly theer rose afore my heyes a gorgus pallus, wi' a thousand chambers. In an' 'out theer walked many old an' worn out soldier men, wi' all kind o' scars, an' many maimed o' limb. All o' them was aged an' past service; an' as they went out an' come in, th' ol' men all cried out: "God bless King Charles!" Then I opened my heyes an' wuz sore worritted o'er my dream.' Hup Charles roars: 'Nell Gwynne, I wish you'd dream dreams as didn't cost so much!' Then she ans'er hup: "Oh, o'course I know'd you wouldn't do it!' w'en ee says: 'Well ye know amiss that time, Nell Gwynne, fur I *will* do it!' An' ee did!"

He snorted and beamed on me in very excess of triumph at his historical recital and continued deprecatingly:

"That's th' way th' 'Ospital come'd t' be, sir, an' no 'tother. 'Thout Nell Gwynne's dream, right 'ere in this very 'ouse, sir, hus as made th' British Hempire what it be, wouldn't a 'ad ary place t' lay our ol' an' worn-hout 'eads!"

"Old? Why, Uncle Billy, you're not old;" I insisted encouragingly.

He looked at me a moment commiseratingly. He tugged at his pipe furiously. Then taking his wrinkled face in his two hands and planting his elbows on the table stolidly, he said with childish vanity and woebegone earnestness:

"I'll be ninety-two year ol', this month, God willing!"

"Impossible!" I retorted affecting amazement.

"Ninety-two year," he repeated solemnly. "'Listed in th' 31st Foot, in 1819; served over forty years; an' come back t' th' workus or that—that 'ere pen as ain't much better!"

"Kith and kin all gone, Uncle Billy?"

"Kith an' kin all gone."

"No brothers, or sisters, or friends?"

"Not ary one."

"No children, or wife or—?"

"See 'ere, now, pardner—no 'fense sense Mike's gone t' Brompton!—I told yer all was mustered out."

"Why didn't you ever have a wife, Uncle Billy?"

I cannot tell why I drove him so close on this point. Perhaps it sprang from vagarous human contrariness. But I did it with a dim sort of notion there had been perhaps somewhere, sometime, a little woman, proud in her way of this battered old hulk in its braver days, and that he might have forgotten the fact, along with other things old soldiers should often better have remembered.

"William Merrill—that's my full name, sir, an' born in Bedfordshire—*had* a wife, forty or fifty years ago, sir."

"Forty or fifty years ago!—here in London, Uncle Billy?"

"Ay, right here in Lunnon."

"What became of her?"

"Dead."

"Do you know that?"

"Does I know I'm lookin' at you?"

"But *how* do you know that she died?"

"Does I know I 'ave this 'ere rose-red dec'rashun on my breastie? Does I know I 'ave this 'ere yaller an' blue dec'rashun on my tother breastie? Does I know w'ere an' 'ow I got 'em? Does I know w'en I left service on a bob (a shilling) a day pension, I marched more miles o'er Lunnon streets, a searchin' of 'er than I never trod in Turkey or th' Crimea? Does I know that nothin' on yearth'd a made me give hup th' searchin' an' th' pension, an' lay my bones in that theer livin' greave, 'cept I was cock-sure she was dead an' gone!—gettin' nothin' but a penny a day, fur ale an' 'baccy money, a bunk no bigger than poor Mike's box t' sleep on, an' arf a loaf, a ounce o' butter, Thames skimmin's fur soup, an' a bowl of yarb tea, all fur a 'ealthy man t' thrive on?—ugh!" he concluded with a fierce shrug of resentment at his environment and contempt for my own ignorance of what had so long ago proven a bitter finality to this old, old veteran who was snorting and fuming before me.

There was an easy way to dispel this outburst of feeling, and when it had been utilized I led him back over the sunnier road of his fondness for his dead comrade, to a glimpse of his daily life in Ward 10, Chelsea hospital.

I thus discovered the curious facts that Mike had some sixty years before, been a rival for his dead wife's hand; that Uncle Billy had won after a fierce courtship; and that the singular human drama of so many years before had drawn the two men together afield; had welded them in closer friendship when the bitter days of the pensioner's life had come; and that here they had at last battled along together, now in almost irreconcilable quarrels, again in firmer and more pathetic friendships, until Comrade Mike, in his failing, imbecile hours, had taken to little peculations upon his friend's scant larder, which had brought about an undying hatred between the two, terminating at last in the pitiful scene I had witnessed in Chelsea hospital yard.

I sat beside the old fellow for more than half of that day. I listened to his brave tales of valorous deeds; his objurgations upon the life at Chelsea, an endless repetition of meanness and cunning, petty injustice and burning discontent; his stealthy confidences of other pensioners' weaknesses, bravado and cowardice and his own wondrous days and ways; and, more pitiful than all, his ever-recurring querulousness, childishness and helplessness, now since his last comrade on earth was gone.

As I sat and listened I built my story over and over: Of the two old pensioners, rivals in youth, comrades in arms, still comrades in the touching quest for the woman they both had loved, comrades in the wilder, fiercer battles of their last companionship, with the final deadly hurt which drove them apart until the lips of one were forever still, and then the old man groveling upon his knees beside the coffin and the pall, just before the saddening cortege moved away, as its climax of hopeless pathos and grief; until it all moved within me from beginning to end with tumultuous, impetuous tread.

Then I pressed upon the old fellow some coin for comforting tobacco and ale, saw him back to the pleasant hospital grounds, and, bidding him a hearty good-bye, started to turn away.

Holding his rough old hand for a moment, I was thrilled with a sudden and convincing thought. It took expression in my parting words as I looked in his doleful face.

"Uncle Billy, I believe something will happen to relieve your loneliness up there in Ward 10, since Mike has gone away."

"Only one thing could 'appen now, sir;" he replied with a startling groan.

I knew what he meant; but that was not my thought.

"No, no; it will not be that, Uncle Billy. It is something better, brighter than that. You have not shown me yet your wife is dead. I believe—I *know*—she will yet be found to take Mike's place through many sunny days!"

The old man wrung his hand fiercely out of mine. He staggered back against the stone pillar of the gateway, and would have fallen, had not the old pensioner sentry come to his support.

My last glimpse of him, as I turned and almost fled, was a picture that will never leave my heart. The old pensioner's face had turned from bronze to deathly white, and I felt that unutterable maledictions were struggling from his lips for the false hopes I had so cruelly raised within him.

But in some wild, heedless, unaccountable way, I had a stubborn belief in what I had felt and said. It possessed me over and above every impulse towards my own remorseless task.

"That woman is alive, here in London. I shall be instrumental in bringing these two strife-beaten old souls together," came flashing and whirling in upon me again and again as I hastened back to the city and my work. I did not reason this out. I could not. It followed me even when I stole into the National Gallery, and for added inspiration in my story-making, stood before Herkomer's great painting of the Chelsea pensioners at vesper service.

Yes, there they all were, grimly and awfully real and true. Not very reverential, these old war dogs of other days. You can see they are uneasy as children in their pews. You almost hear their feet getting into complications with wooden legs, canes and crutches; and one cannot but listen for strange snufflings, clearing of throats and hard asthmatic breathing. But the mighty master piece—almost history, in suggestiveness, of Britain's imperial conquests and her thankless niggardliness to the broken lives that had been cast remorselessly aside—does not one whit exaggerate the wondrous pathos of their collective and individual aspect. The painter has told all the wretched, heartbreaking story in these white heads and battle-scarred, bent frames bowed in groveling, protestive silence at the time of benediction and prayer.

In a half hour more I was back at my desk, my window shutters closely drawn and hiding the dreary flapping of a ghostly London fog, my fire and light burning brightly, and everything in readiness for my inspirated task. Then the one thought flashed over me that a master had told illimitibly more on canvas than could ever be revealed in words. But I fought this down, and still essayed to write.

Again and again I began, but it seemed like contemptible plagiarism, yes, almost like literary sacrilege, to even tread on ground so incomparably traversed before me. The entire fabric of the day began to vanish like a phantom of the night. I saw first, Herkomer's great painting; then the wretched face of the poor old man I had left half fainting at Chelsea Hospital Gate; and then—the face, or outlines of a face, my dogged persistence in an apparently hopeless fancy was slowly conjuring out of the misty depths of visionary clouds.

For hours I sat thus wordless and effortless before my desk and papers. I had long before flung my pen from me and it had rebounded from the desk and fallen with one end resting across the huge glass inkstand. With my head held tightly in my hands, I was gazing vacantly at both, seeing neither fairly from stress of mental excitement and distraction.

Suddenly within the curves, protrusions and indentations of the ornamental glass on the outer surface of the inkstand the half caught lines of a woman's face arrested my attention. More startling still, it was the identical face which my fancy had evolved from the strange and pathetic incidents of the day, and it now took on definite form and feature in the old glass inkstand before me.

Not only did this face of a woman come distinctly into view, but aside from its plainly traceable lineaments, below and beneath it was a crouched, bent and humped little body, while the penholder had been grotesquely transformed into the figure's stout and sturdy staff.

I laughed outright at the curious hallucination and challenged the old pensioner as if in petty triumph with:

"Ah! I told you your wife was not dead, Uncle Billy. See! Here we have already found her!"

Believe it or not, the face in the inkstand responded to this with many and the sweetest of nods and smiles.

"There you are then, Mistress Merrill?" I banteringly asked of the face in the inkstand.

A nod and a smile followed this instantly.

"And you are still patiently waiting for Uncle Billy who never came?"

Imperative noddings and a mournful smile were the immediate response.

"Dear, dear! It is very loyal and good of you; but won't you please go away just for a little, until this hateful story is begun and done, Mistress Merrill?" I pleaded kindly but distractedly.

"No, no, no!" was plainly answered in the dejected head shaking in the inkstand; and I heard, or thought I plainly heard, the imperative thumping dissent of the staff upon my hollow desk.

Something like a feeling of solemnity now came upon me. The persistence and insistence of the face in the inkstand roused me from dalliance to action.

I rubbed my eyes furiously, thinking, "Now, presto! and away it flies!" but it was still there. I clapped my hands loudly together, but the wraith was unmoved. I dashed my penholder down beside the inkstand, but it was as though the humped body had merely momentarily laid aside her staff.

I left my chair and bathed my eyes in cold water, paced the room for a time, and even read in my books. When I turned to my desk again, it seemed as though the face in the inkstand was looking wonderingly and protestingly into mine. I stepped to the gas jet, turned it off, went out of my apartment and took several quick turns in the hallway. When I had come back and relighted the gas, the little old woman only gazed up into my face with a puzzled and troubled look.

I rang my bell and a servant shortly came.

"Take this inkstand," I said to him, "have it cleaned thoroughly and bring me a fresh well of ink."

When he had done my bidding and had retired from the room, it was a long time before I dare turn to the cruel effacement I felt certain had been wrought. Even then, my eyes stole sheepishly, guiltily, to the desk.

There, brighter, clearer, more ineradicable than before, was the face in the inkstand, its tear-dimmed eyes following my every movement with a pleading look of bewilderment and fear.

In a moment more, with hat and great-coat donned, and with a parting glance at the face which now seemed radiant in smiling approval, I had left my inn and gained London's midnight streets.

Almost as in a dream where a city's thoroughfares seem like cloud-filled canals with ghostly humans drifting along their lower depths, I turned into Maiden Lane, rounded Leicester Square; pushed through the harpy throngs of Trafalgar Square and the Strand; crowded on into Fleet street; penetrated the maze of wynds and alleys round about the Royal Justice Courts, as far as Chancery Lane, and thence, around by Lincoln Inn fields, by zigzag, tortuous course, peering into every woman's face I saw for likeness of the face that haunted me, I came at last, exhausted and discouraged in my search, to the corner of Southampton street and the Strand.

Here he halted for a little, leaning against the Southampton side of the extreme corner of the building there, gazing ruefully into the Strand, which was still crowded with the Godforsaken of London after midnight hours.

"It is *her* face; and I will find it yet!" I muttered aloud as I cast a parting glance up and down the fog-shrouded human tides of the Strand.

"Is it an old face or a young one, you are looking for, my dear?" inquired a soft voice at my elbow, just around the corner of the building in the Strand.

The voice was as sweet as an innocent child's; and yet it held that subtle chord of interest and sympathy which can alone be modulated by a mature and tender human heart.

I whirled and faced, or rather bent over, the speaker; for her head scarcely came to my waist. I saw with beating heart and bewildered brain the haunting face in the ink-stand; the very face I sought; the face of a little, old, humped-back woman, with sturdy staff in hand; a face set upwardly, as is the sorry way with dwarfs; a face in which some unutterable human hopelessness was drawn into stony lines, and yet on which there seemed, as you looked upon it, to grow in high relief a radiant transfigurement of trust and faith; the oldest, plainest, sweetest face in the great London town; and a face I could only look upon in astounded silence for its friendly reassuring smiles.

"I'm just Drury lane Betty, sir. Everybody on the Strand knows Betty. Some of them loves her too. I'm hereabouts at nights—I like it best, sir—and sometimes Betty helps them that falls to the earth from discouragements and the like, sir. The night-time is when help's most needed, sir. Besides, old Betty is looking for a face, too, sir. But are *you* in trouble? Sometimes them that's best dressed, sir, have deepest hurts. I'm just now going in, sir, and, if you don't mind, we will have a cup of tea together. We can talk better over a bit of fire and a cup of tea, you know. Come along, my dear!"

She swung her staff into one hand and grasped it firmly; with the other she reached confidently for my own and placed it beneath her shoulder and trundled away with me toward Fleet street, her head perked to one side like a little white old bird's; her fascinating prattle only now and then checked, as some officer or long frequenter of the quarter gave her commisserating though hearty greeting, to which she replied cheerily, calling each one by his Christian name; until we at last turned into the now darker and less frequented Drury Lane.

A walk of a few steps in this thoroughfare brought us to the fruiterers' district, and we halted before an ancient and narrow structure. Here my strange companion produced an enormous key, and ushered me into a hallway black as the portals of Erberus.

Ordinarily I would not have ascended its creaking stairs with any human other than a Scotland Yard inspector for a thousand sovereigns, but I felt no fear with her. Up, up, up we scrambled, the dwarfed little body guiding me without misstep or blunder, until a fourth landing had been reached, when with a lively "Here we are, my dear," a door was thrown open and we stood full in the rosy light of a large and cheerful room.

It was the loft of the building, transformed in a homely fashion into a most comfortable abode. A huge and ancient fireplace occupied nearly one entire end. Near this, at one side, were curious cupboards, and, at the other, a snow white bed. Between, full in the warm firelight, stood an ample table, ready set, and beside this was a large easy chair, turned partly to the fire, with a pair of cosy slippers resting invitingly at its feet.

"It's all *mine, from curb to roof, sir;*" said Betty proudly. "Forty years is a long, long time; but I said to myself, now, maybe he will be a long time coming back, and how happy he'll be to have a home, all of our own, in which to lay his head. Yes, forty years!—forty years!" she added with a pathetic tremor in her voice. "And I began as charwoman to the fruiterers in Drury Lane. Now, they pay me rent, my dear!"

Out along one side of the narrow loft were a few low and tidy cots. She saw my inquiring look and said with the sweetest smile I had seen on her drawn old face:

"That's Drury Lane Betty's hospital. When I'm in the streets at night—looking for him, you know!—oftentimes some one falls to the earth, as I told you. If Betty knows of it, this is where they bring them for a little, my dear; for I think, what if he fell to the earth, might not some other body do the same for him? Yes, yes, yes!—forty years is a long, long time, my dear!"

"Bless you, aunty, for the dearest, bravest soul in London!" burst from my lips as I almost reverently patted her white old head. "And you have been all these years trying to find *him?*"

The white face against the gateway of another hospital was now haunting me more ominously and desperately than this living double of the little old face in the inkstand.

She was pouring the tea into the cups. A cup and saucer stood before the half turned arm chair. She raised the kettles as if to fill this empty cup. I thought her face grew more pallid for an instant. She hesitated in a scared, startled way and then said sadly and plaintively:

"All—these—years! Why, I nearly filled his cup! Tell me, sir!—tell me!—would I not know it here—here, sir," as her hand fluttered to her loyal heart, "if he was dead?"

"Yes, yes, yes!"

"And you are sure he is still living?"

It would have been a cruel heart that could have cast the shadow of a single doubt upon this almost infinite patience and faith; and I answered her with the bravest words I could.

Then as we sat at tea, I listened, listened, to another life-drama of waiting, *searching, longing,* such as books can never tell; listened to hopes and plans and faiths as fresh and sweet and innocent as ever maiden breathed to other maiden's eager ears; and listened, daring not to reveal what I exultantly hoped and believed, for the one word, the absent husband's name, to make me safe and sure.

Deepest artifice could not secure it. Wiliest surprise would not reveal it. As though it were the last slender thread that held her to her own, she had buried this most needed thing, perhaps from the very horror of which might come from its utterance, in the innermost depths of her irreconciliably tender yet cunning nature and life.

The gray of the morning had come when I arose to go. And would I come again?—for at times the hours were lonely here. Yes, and yes and yes again, *from me, if I could bring along a friend.* Then the sooner the better, the sweet old voice prattled and prattled on. To breakfast, then, this very morning, at ten—for this friend might know him. Yes and yes again and again, as I stroked her silvered head and turned away.

Then to my inn for a few hours' sleep—my story still untouched—where the face in the inkstand had wholly faded out with the night; and then I felt a solemn conviction that the sign had been real and sure and true.

At last, with all speed, to Royal Chelsea Hospital, where I learned that Uncle Billy had suffered a sad turn in the night and where his pensioner comrades whispered he would follow Mike to Brompton now.

"Now if love can save him!" I mentally vowed; and in an hour's time I had him clad in his flaming Prince Albert and the smartest he possessed and safely beside me in a swiftly whirling hansom, headed for the Strand and Drury Lane.

With pursing lips, lowering brows and wildly bulging eyes, the old pensioner often essayed to speak, and I as often increased his dazed wonderment, but silenced him with, "I've found a friend who knew *her*, Uncle Billy!"

As we alighted in Drury Lane, a few old fruiterers standing at their doors nodded and whispered together:

"Maybe it's *him*, at last!"

Inside the hallway an impulse seized me to bid him remove his lumbering shoes. He obeyed me unquestioningly, and we stole softly through laboriously up the stairway to Aunt Betty's open door. When we entered, the little dwarf was busy in her hospital ward of the loft.

I seated Uncle Billy in the huge arm chair, drew the waiting slippers upon his feet, and the old war-dog in an instant, had closed his eyes with inexpressible peacefulness and joy.

Then, stepping to Aunt Betty's side, there was a pleasant morning greeting, just as though we had known each other for years.

"Aunt Betty," I began with illy suppressed excitement, "my friend is over there, by the fireplace. Won't you see if he is in the right chair? I'll be back presently from the street."

I sped down that ancient stairway as though I had committed a capital crime. But my flight was not swift enough to prevent my hearing a few quick thumpings of Aunt Betty's staff upon the floor of the loft; a hoarse gurgle of, "Fore God!—Betty!—It's *you!* Purty heyes, 'ump an' hall!" a sweet voiced ripple of, "William Merrill!—something told me the waiting'd soon be done?" and my knowing that in the blessed silence which followed, as blissful a love as earth had ever known had found anew its own.

A murmur of eager impatience finally succeeded the almost reverential silence which had fallen upon the assembled company as the Student Traveler's tale was done.

"But the story!—the story!" was chorused. "Was that story ever written?"

"Eh?—Oh, yes; the story. Yes," the student traveler concluded musingly; "and quite in time for press. It was a thrilling story of grand and impossible people of whom grand and impossible people dearly love to read, while grandly and impossibly ignoring such simple lives and loves as these. But the story of the face in the inkstand has never been even imperfectly told until now."

Hopkins' Bluff.

CHICAGO, Nov. 1.—Mayor Hopkins today began suit for $50,000 damages from John R. Tanner, chairman of the Republican state central committee, for libel. The claim is made because of the assertion of Mr. Tanner that the mayor was "levying blackmail on the vices of the city."